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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to determine why such a small number (less than 2 percent) of the approximately 9,000 adult male prisoners housed in the 3 complexes of the California Institution for Men (Chino, California) in the mid-1980s were actively participating in the college program offered at the prison sites. Data were collected through interviews with several prison administrators, staff, and inmates. The study determined that only about 3,000 men were actually housed at the facilities at any one time and that only about 60 percent of them were eligible for the college program. So 10 percent of the prison population, not less than 2 percent actually participated. Reasons for lack of participation stemmed from an overall anti-college bias on the part of administrators and inmates. College programs were not widely publicized, so that inmates often did not know about the programs or were discouraged from registering. For those who did register, long hours on prison jobs, trouble in the prison, administrative snafus, or transfers often prevented them from attending class regularly. In addition, most of the administrators preferred that prisoners attend vocational programs that were directly useful to the prison system, while others were resentful of prisoners having a chance to go to college. Prisoners who were seen as "smart" by participating in the program faced coercion or violence from other inmates. Finally, participating in the college program often reduced the inmates' time off for working and, therefore, resulted in longer prison stays a powerful deterrent to their participation. (KC)

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Why Does a Large Prison Population Yield So Few Participants in a College Program Offered at Prison Sites?

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Statement of the Problem

In the mid-1980's there were approximately 9,000 adult male prisoners housed in the three complexes that constituted the California Institution for Men located in the Chino, California area. At that time only 157 inmates—roughly 1.75% of the prison population—were actively participating in the college program offered at the prison sites. My original study was an attempt to determine why such a large prison population yielded so few students who enrolled in and actually attended those classes.

Methodology

I preliminarily contacted Mr. D., program director of EPIC (Educational Programs in Corrections) for a Southern California University that was the independent academic institution which administered and accredited college courses within the three prisons. Mr. D. expressed considerable enthusiasm for the study stating that it was "an area that needed to be looked into." He provided me with the names of the administrators whom I was to contact at the various facilities and indicated that the study and its findings could prove to be of value to those administrators as it seemed possible that it would provide them with information that could make their jobs easier.

Mr. J., who then served as administrator of college programs for both the California Institution for Men - Main Facility, and the California Institution for Men - East Facility, agreed to meet with me and to allow me to interview inmates and to observe classes once the project received written authorization from Ms. Wanda Briscoe, Chief of Education of the California Department of Corrections in Sacramento. Mr. J. agreed to be interviewed for the study but insisted that his interview take place first and that he be provided with a copy of all the questions I intended to ask the student inmates.

Ms. G., who served as administrator of the college program at California Rehabilitation Center (CRC), was quite reluctant to cooperate and generally nonreceptive to the idea of the study. However, Ms. G. also agreed to cooperate once I received written authorization from Ms. Briscoe's deputy, Mr. Keith Haybal. Ms. G. refused to be interviewed personally, except briefly by phone, referring me instead to her clerk, Mrs. V., who was about to leave CRC and who I suspect was therefore more cooperative than Ms. G. may have intended in permitting me to interview inmates.

Because the two topmost prison administrators seemed somewhat defensive and fearful that my study would reflect negatively on them, I endeavored to employ comparatively positive wording in the expression of my preliminary questions. Since Mr. J. was concerned about the nature of the questions I would be posing to the student-inmates, I assured him that they would be of the same nature as those that I asked of him. For example, I would begin each interview by contrasting the college enrollment numbers with the overall inmate population figures for that facility and I would then follow up by asking what could be done to make the program better so as to encourage an increase in future enrollments in the college courses. (The apparent "constructiveness" of this approach masked the fact that, as a researcher, I hoped that the student-inmates would tell me what they perceived as being wrong with the college program and its administration in the process of telling me how they felt the program could be improved. This expectation was ultimately borne out.) All my questions were open-ended in nature. I tried to let each interview follow the direction that the interviewee considered to be important with the provision that all suggestions be realistically workable given the political and fiscal constraints of the prison situation.

The history of the college program within the context of correctional facilities was not immediately apparent but it slowly emerged in my interviews.

Prisons are essentially penal in their nature prioritizing discipline and security. However, it is necessary to provide some opportunities for positive experiences that essentially function as pacifiers, reducing tensions among inmates. One color television per barracks floor and a fully equipped weight lifting pit in an exercise yard were provided at all three facilities (May, 1976). Most correctional facilities throughout the country also prioritized rehabilitation at that time at lease rhetorically (Murray, 1983) although there were those who maintained that such efforts were useless (Martinson, 1974). However, most of those efforts are vocational in nature (George and Krist, 1980; Carlson, 1982) or remedial in an academic sense (Coffey and Lewis, 1979; George and Krist, 1980). As the then Chief Justice, Warren Burger noted (1981),

> "One small but practical step—indeed, a step that I have advocated for many years—is the introduction of mandatory educational and vocational programs for all inmates. No one should leave prison without at least being able to read, to do basic arithmetic and being trained in a marketable job skill."

As the rather poorly xeroxed copy of the cover of the February 1982 issue of Corrections Today indicated – and which I included with my original study—a number of programs, consistent with the Chief Justice's comments, were considered to be "major correctional policy issues" but college courses were not among them in spite of Mr. Burger's clear indication of the desirability of "educational . . . programs for all inmates." It would seem that the rhetoric was not entirely consistent with the practice. This study provided insights into some of those inconsistencies.

Unfortunately any study of this nature, will be subject to limitations. In this case the observation time was limited and the number of people available for interviewing was only a small fraction of all those concerned.

Conceptual Framework

At that time numerous colleges and universities in collaboration with officials at nearby correctional institutions had been providing college-level courses in degree programs for prison inmates. Instructors involved with these programs usually had to make significant adjustments in their approach to classroom instruction due to the vast differences between prison classrooms and other educational settings. The prison environment presents challenges and difficulties that set it apart from the conventional classroom.

Prospective students are usually screened carefully and only a small percentage are permitted to enroll in college-level prison courses. Methods of selection are often based upon administrative screening to insure that the students will not present a behavioral problem; academic testing takes place; and self selection is also a factor (students must volunteer). Correctional institutions presented numerous challenges. Because any inmate will be subjected to a variety of psychological and emotional stresses that goad and upset him in many ways each day, he often comes to class unhappy, frustrated and quite defensive. Sometimes he is even hostile. Before such a student can be stimulated his attention must be distracted from his immediate problems and focused on the subject being taught, understandably a difficult task. Many inmates, particularly those in maximum-security institutions, are sentenced to hard labor. Even in less stringent institutions inmates have jobs. Thus many students come to class after long days of demanding activity, weary and occasionally even sunburned. Compounding the problem of fatigue is the fact that most such classes meet once each week for several hours. Thus many students have been awake for quite some time by the end of the class. In such an environment, dozing students are not unusual despite efforts by the instructor to engage their attention. From the instructor's standpoint, it is usually difficult to lecture in an interesting and stimulating manner for several consecutive hours even with periodic breaks. Often fatigue on the

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part of both students and teachers is the reason for the termination of a class session rather than that the material has been adequately covered. Other difficulties arise from an inmate lack of control over his movements within the institution. Sometimes he can quite rightfully claim that any tardiness is not his fault. Often he is late because his job went beyond closing time, preventing an opportunity to clean up and dine before coming to class. Worse still, students in some prisons are sometimes forced to miss an entire class period because of administrative mistakes or unrest in a dormitory.

Frequently a student will miss class due to his violation of a prison rule and subsequent commitment to disciplinary isolation.

While it is the norm for a student to remain in the same prison until the end of a school term, occasionally exceptions are made and there are times when these exceptions can not be anticipated.

At some facilities classes are held in huge rooms designed as either mess halls or visiting rooms. The acoustical qualities of the cavernous areas are very poor since the rooms are usually beset with a variety of interrupting noises, toilets flushing, overhead pipes snapping and popping and bells ringing. These obstacles create demands for both the teacher and the student. Students for their part must have exceptional auditory discrimination. Inadequate lighting can also be a problem. Due to lack of funds the instructor may have to provide many teaching aides. It is not unusual for a teacher to carry a movie projector, a rolled map, and a bulging briefcase to class. Blackboards and desks may be available but sometimes they are in poor condition.

Disciplinary problems at penal institutions are only an occasional problem. On the whole the inmate student is attentive and well behaved. Cheating occurs in prison as elsewhere, but a strong vigiland teacher can keep this problem minimal. Its occurrence however presents a difficult dilemma for the instructor; many of the students have been convicted of exceptionally violent crimes and are living in an environment where assaultive behavior is the norm. Not surprisingly, a teacher is occasionally reluctant to act. One solution to this problem is to administer tests that are less likely to invite successful cheating, such as essay examinations or several different objective examinations.

To be successful amid the many challenges and problems inherent in penal educational programs, an instructor and the program he represents must possess an extraordinary commitment to teaching and learning. Perhaps the most subtle and difficult task facing an instructor is motivating his students by revealing to them the rewards of education. It is difficult to convince a man who may not be free to use his education for many years that he is receiving a tangible benefit from his efforts in college. Still there is a certain pride and desire for self improvement within an inmate student that can be accessed with luck and the right technique. The "right technique" may and often will vary from student to student.

Probably the prime considerations in personal motivation for the instructor are to exhibit a thorough knowledge of his/her subject, to show concern for student comprehension of the material, and to avoid appearing weak. Regarding the last point, respect for a teacher is essential, and any appearance of weakness can lead to inattention, rampant cheating, and even attempts to intimidate an instructor into altering a grade. Fortunately, inmate students are largely self motivated, much more perhaps than many free students. Many believe that a good college record will be instrumental in gaining parole; others who were taking courses did so simply to qualify, like many free students, for veterans' benefits; another segment pursued knowledge simply for its own sake and a degree.

Despite the dedication and teaching abilities a particular instructor may bring into a prison classroom, there are still some pitfalls often stemming from these very assets. The majority of the more perceptive students quickly recognize compassion in a teacher. Affection-starved prisoners often press such an instructor into a type of "father-confessor" role that can be detrimental to the proper relationship between teacher and student. Maintaining proper

distance is difficult when inmates display such a touching openness and desire to become friends. Nevertheless, this must be done. Techniques of maintaining the right distance are complex and difficult to apply.

Often the inmate student is highly motivated and extremely interested in the material. Students are mature adults in most cases and are in class because they want to be there. Classroom discussions are at a high level and unique insights are often available. It is the general consensus among instructors that many prisoners are intellectually of higher caliber than free students, possibly due to the selection process.

Many prisoners are encouraged when they see a compassionate teacher, believing him or her to be an example of the acceptance and helpfulness of people on the outside. One is struck by the response of prisoners to honest, positive emotions. Perhaps the greatest inspiration to the inmate student is his observation in such a situation that "somebody out there gives a damn."

An instructor can show interest in his/her students by supplying reading material, assisting with their attempts to be accepted in advance by outside colleges should they obtain parole, and talking with them during class breaks. A teacher should also become acquainted with the educational staff at a prison and cooperate closely with it. Such a relationship is important in procuring necessary class materials for his/her students, and in encouraging a commitment to the program and a larger educational budget which among other things may provide for a library with adequate resources. In terms of personal rewards to both students and instructors, college programs at many prisons have been successful. More importantly, learning is taking place in those programs.

There is clearly a place for college-level programs in prisons. Such programs meet many of the academic needs of inmate students and aid in the difficult task of rehabilitation. For many inmates who will eventually gain their release, this academic experience will also assist them in their adjustment to a new environment.

This framework is important because it provides a realistic context in which a college-level prison program should be considered. When such a program falls significantly short of its potential for any reason, consideration should be given to the reasons why, with a view toward remedying those problems if possible and maybe even turning the negatives into positives. So the question is not only, "Why does such a large prison population provide so few students who enroll in and actually attend college-level classes?", it is also "What are the underlying causes of this problem?". Related questions are: "What can be done to get at the root of this problem in order to remedy it?" and, finally, "What are the other positive developments that can be brought about by addressing the problem and working toward a solution?"

Data Presentation

Mr. J. insisted that I begin with him and the sequencing of the interviews was fortunate. He advised me that one of my major premises was flawed—whereas there are 5,500 total inmates assigned at any one time to CIM-Main and CIM-East, many of these are not actually within the facilities. Approximately 1,200 are going through "Reception and Orientation" and another 1,200 are going through the "Reception Guidance Center", where they take a number of diagnostic tests to determine the level of institution to which they will be assigned. Once inmates are admitted to the actual facility they most have either a high school diploma, a G.E.D., or a 10.0 (10^{th} year, 0 month) reading score to be eligible for the college program. Mr. J. indicated that these requirements eliminate approximately 60% of the 3,100 inmates who are actually at the facilities. Of course this still means that less than 10% of the eligible inmate population participate in the college program. I subsequently verified Mr. J.'s numbers through Mr. D.

Mr. J. indicated that when new college courses are to be added at his facilities he promotes them through the Inmate Advisory Council; he publishes them on a flyer in a display case and posts copies of the flyers in the barracks.

I would subsequently learn from my inmate interviews that these procedures were not nearly as productive in fact as they were in theory. I learned that the Inmate Advisory Council gives very low priority to college classes, dealing instead with the inmates' "major concerns" such as problems with food, crowded housing, changes in administrative policy, and drugs in the barracks. As one inmate said, "Those guys on the IAC could care less about college classes."

It was a consensus emerging from virtually all my interviews that the flyers Mr. J. posts in the display case and in the various barracks are rarely seen by anyone. One inmate said, "There's always somebody looking for another piece of scratch paper and so they'll take whatever's handy." Other inmates were more blunt in their expressions, indicating that ineligible inmates or resentful guards (and even administrators) destroy the flyers. As I was told, there are many who think the inmates have it too easy, guards who can't go to college themselves, or administrators who say they had to pay their way through college. As one inmate put it, "Not everyone is excited about this idea of 'commit a crime, get a degree'".

Another policy that substantially undermines the college program is something called "day for day." It seems that prior to 1980 it was standard practice for all inmates to get out approximately 1/3 of the time off their sentences for "good time-work time." This meant that if an inmate worked at a full-time job within the prison he could get released early. At that time prison administrators found themselves confronting a problem of overcrowding when there were political pressures for tougher sentences. So when the courts began to stiffen the sentences that were being handed down, the prisons changed their policy from the old 1/3 "good time-work time" to "day-for-day time cuts" with which an inmate could now work off ½ his time by working at a full time job. Studying something of a vocational or academically remedial nature was considered a full-time job. But college study was only considered a half-time job. As Mrs. V. said, the reasoning was that "if a person were going to college ont he outside he couldn't just go to school, he'd have to get a job to support his schooling." This wouldn't be such a big problem for the inmate-student were it not for the fact that supplementary ½ time jobs are very difficult to find and the inmate-student who can't find such a job loses his day-for-day credits. Clearly this was a major sacrifice that many inmates were simply not prepared to make.

Consistent with everything that has been revealed to this point there were many inmates who sensed that the attitude of prison personnel toward them was that they "didn't have anyting coming; that they've got one shot and only one shot at vocational training; and that, if they blew that chance there should be no forgiveness within the system." Another inmate said essentially the same thing. "College students are seen as being smart. It's as if you've had your chance and blown it and others haven't had that chance."

On the other hand many vocational skills help the prison directly. The cobbler repairs shoes for everyone working at the facility. The dairy program at CIM-Main provides milk, butter, and ice cream for every prison in the state. I was told that other workers produce cosmetics and soaps that are "sold" to other state facilities such as the juvenile halls, lottery commission, and the health education and welfare facility. Another inmate said he knew a 4-time loser who came back to the same prison job every time. Inmates also believe that vocational and remedial academic instruction pleases the authorities in Sacramento. But, as the inmate said, "The college program is the stepchild of the system."

When I tried to determine what incentive there was for the prison system to provide remedial academic instruction I was only given a general answer. "There are more programs for non-conformers. There are more of them and they need pacifying." Beyond that generalization, basic education is seen as necessary for success on parole; a sixth-grade basic literacy level is seen as necessary for success on parole. Inmates who can read and communicate are seen as more employable. It would seem that the same process of reasoning could be applied to the college program but it is perceived differently. In fact, there would seem to be an anti-intelligence bias within the system. As one inmate said to me, "If I say something intelligent to another guy (inmate) he will probably say to me, 'OK, let's go

to the men's room.' He'll feel that I've proven my manhood by saying something intelligent, now he's got to prove his manhood by beating me up." Or, as another inmate put it, "Other than being deprived of my personal freedom the most difficult part of this place is the intellectual sterility."

Data Analysis

The college program is the most under-emphasized educational program within the three prison facilities that have been studied. Many inmates are brought into the prison facilities with only a disciplinary orientation. Others who are informed of the programs are given only the most cursory explanation of the college program. In fact, there are many inmates at each of the facilities that I visited who were unaware that there was a college program available to them.

The administrative procedures that were used to advise students that courses were being offered tended to break down quite frequently in virtually all respects. "Word of mouth" among the inmates was the only moderately successful communication system among the student inmates. Sometimes students did not learn that they were actually enrolled in a course until several weeks after classes had begun. Some student inmates who succeed in enrolling in the college classes were transferred away before the semester ended.

Most prison libraries contain current magazines and a limited number of paperback books. Also, teachers can order books through the libraries; student-inmates are unable to do so. In essence, with the exception of the law libraries in some prisons, library facilities are simply inadequate.

Although no administrator will acknowledge it openly, the college program seemed to be competing against the vocational and remedial academic education programs which had far more political clout. See the "day-for-a-day" policy mentioned previously. There was a heavy bias within the system against the college program. Yet I could not help but be struck by the one-sidedness of everyone's perspectives. Mr. D. was enthusiastic because it was in his best interest to see the college program grow and expand. Mr. J. and Mrs. G. were very guarded because it was in their interest to see the college program grow and improve but it was also in their interest for the current program to be seen as satisfactory. Mrs. V. was transferring out of the prison system and so she was fearless and utterly candid. The inmates would like a better program and everything they say was colored by that perspective. Everyone stridently wanted what served their purposes.

It did not seem to have occurred to anyone that one way to get what they wanted would be to give others what they want. There was enormous support within the professional psychological literature for such an approach (Skinner, 1953; Lazarus, 1971; Estes, 1975). There was also evidence within the correctional literature that adversarial relationships between inmates and prison personnel were not only dangerous but detrimental to the well being of all parties concerned (Nelson, 1984). There was also evidence that well-run educational programs were beneficial, contributing to the prison environment; reducing rates of recidivism, and contributing to the future success of participants at all levels (Dean, 1982) and that a vocational emphasis was not always as advantageous as it seemed (Grissom & Conan, 1981). In an era of overcrowded prisons housed in outdated facilities it was then and still is in the best interest of all parties concerned to learn to live and work together harmoniously (Nagel, 1984).

Conclusion

There was an anti-education—or at least an anti-higher education—attitude that seemed to be manifest in the policies and procedures employed by the educational administrators of the three complexes that constituted the California Institution for Men at Chino, California. Whether or not these decisions were deliberate, the effect was the same. The college programs in these penal facilities were only a faint shadow of their potential; and that potential was being squandered.